

American Newsletter

Details of New U.S. Air Force Programme : Orders Sufficient to Keep Manufacturers in Production

By "KIBITZER"

A WEEK or so ago the President's Air Policy Commission (a body that is enquiring into all phases of the aircraft industry over here, and which is doing a most excellent and workmanlike job) heard evidence from the Air Force Secretary and the Air Force Vice-Chief of Staff. What they said was somewhat startling, not only for its contents, but also because it was given at an open hearing. It must have sent the foreign intelligence boys scurrying to their offices, and doubtless gave some of the friendly friends of the democracies plenty to think about. They gave, in fact, a complete breakdown of the United States Air Force programme, group by group, together with details of the various types now in service, and what was expected of them. (Rocketry and guided missiles were not included!).

All this was evidence of vital importance to the aircraft industry, for not only did it give a glimpse of future requirements, but the secretary made it clear that, provided funds were forthcoming, there would be sufficient orders to keep the manufacturers in limited production in the future. The figure he gave was in the neighbourhood of 3,200 machines per annum, and he suggested that, although it would obviously be impossible to retain the industry in the luxury to which its wartime orders had made it accustomed (and sometimes one gets the impression that some manufacturers consider this is what should be done), they would at least be in a position where rapid up-to-date expansion would be easy if hostilities broke out once more. Naturally, he could not suggest what was to be done about the financing of new civilian types, both large and small. So far as the manufacturers are concerned, that's where they are likely to feel the rub, and about which they are wondering what they do next.

The total programme asked for 6,869 first-line combat aircraft and a reserve of 8,100. At the moment the Air Force has about 40 fully manned groups, which are being increased rapidly by re-activating some of the larger aircraft that were "pickled" and put in storage after V.J. day. This figure will ultimately be increased to 70 groups, of which 20 will be very heavy bomber groups.

An optimistic note was struck when he said that such groups would contain 630 long-range bombers "designed to provide an operational striking force of 500" for a high serviceability percentage, but one that gives a warm feeling of efficiency and security! The heavy bombers would be B-29s and B-50s from the Boeing factory and the huge Corsair B-36s, of which 100 are said to be on order. These will be bolstered by the new Boeing B-52 and possibly the Northrop B-35 and B-49—if and when they get into production. The medium bombers would be drawn from the new jet-powered aircraft, the North American B-45, the Consolidated Vultee B-46, the Boeing B-47 and the Glenn Martin B-47, all of which are undergoing flight tests and seem to be fairly satisfactory. Production orders for the North American B-45 have, in fact, been placed.

The long-range reconnaissance machines would have to be the Republic XF-12 (Rainbow) and the new twin-boom twin-engined Hughes XF-11, which is now undergoing flight trials at Muroc. So far as is known at the time of writing, neither of these machines has been ordered, but something may happen after the New Year. Short-range reconnaissance would be allocated to the tried jet jobs like the new Lockheed P-80 and the Republic P-84. There are two other types which might be used for this work, the Curtiss-Wright XP-87, a long-range utility type fitted with four Westinghouse axial-flow jets, and the Northrop

XP-89. This latter does not follow the normal Northrop wing pattern, but is a straight-wing aircraft with the engine, or it may be engines, in the fuselage under the belly. It has nose armament and room for at least one crew member besides the pilot, and plenty of cameras or radar.

In the fighter class the P-80 and the P-84, and particularly the new swept-back-wing North American P-86, will carry the burden for the time being. Reports on this last machine say it is exceptionally good all round and very fast. Following these more or less conventional types will come the sonic and, it is hoped, supersonic, interceptor fighters. The McDonnell XP-85 (which is a parasite fighter designed to go into the bomb bay of the B-36), the XP-88 from the same manufacturer and then the Lockheed XP-90, the Republic XP-91, and the Consolidated Vultee XP-92. These last three machines will have jet-cum-rocket power, and in view of the stories, which are probably correct, that the Bell XS-1 has approached very close to, even if it has not exceeded, the speed of sound, these last three may well be expected to reach a Mach number of one or over.

The rest of the U.S.A.F. programme consists of troop-carrying aircraft, Transport Command requirements, trainers, and the usual Reserve (2,360 aircraft) and National Guard (3,212 aircraft) Squadrons. These latter are an equivalent organization to our Royal Auxiliary Air Force. The whole programme was welcomed with restraint by the industry, and even if there was a sideways look from those who would have to provide the money (a reaction that was anticipated, and partially offset by a statement that not only had the Russians built copies of the B-29, but that they had 14,000 aircraft in active service, with factories still capable of feeding such squadrons at a high rate of production), there is little doubt that some such programme will be implemented by Congress.

AIR FREIGHT AND CARGO AIRCRAFT

REGULAR readers may, by this time, be thoroughly fed up with my continual mention of the possibilities of air freight. I would like to emphasize once more the importance of this type of operation, both to the aircraft operator and the manufacturer. (I see no reason why it should not be financially satisfactory to both.) When reviewing the rapid growth of cargo flying in the United States it can be argued that this is not an indication of what will happen elsewhere. With this I do not agree. It is true to say that here the great distances involved, all within one country's boundaries, the natural pressure of business that makes everyone feel that everything must be done in a hurry, the great productive ability, a wide geographic dispersal of population centres, all these give air freight a considerable initial advantage. This may be so, but it should also be remembered that air freight operators here are up against one of the best and most highly developed rail and road systems in the world. Despite this, air cargo is growing in the most astonishing fashion.

Let us look at the facts. During the latter part of the war, one or two DC-3 freight aircraft were in use, but it was not until after V.J. Day that things really got going. Since then the number of purely cargo aircraft has increased from one or two machines to over 100. The available cargo space has risen from 6,000 lb in 1942 to over 1,181,700 lb. During September, 1947, alone the air lines